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ABSTRACT

New Jersey's Public School Education Act of 1975 requires local school districts to provide students with "thorough and efficient" educational opportunity. This report describes State initiatives carried out as of April 1986 to help urban districts comply with the act's mandate in the face of the particularly complex and concentrated problems faced by those districts. The report is divided into five parts. A background section describes State Department of Education reorganization, examines the context of urban education, and summarizes findings of effective schools research. Next, a section called "Activities on Behalf of Urban Education" outlines the following initiatives: (1) a seminar for urban educators; (2) State creation of 11 Urban Specialist positions; (3) creation of an Urban Education Advisory Committee; (4) location of the Regional Curriculum Services Unit-North (RCSU) in an urban community; (5) funding of programs for urban dropouts; (6) creation of a Special Assistant for Urban Education position; (7) an urban initiative consisting of the Broad-Based Assistance Program and Operation School Renewal; (8) compensatory education aid; (9) summer remedial assistance with the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT); and (10) vocational education programs. "Activities Relevant to Urban District Improvement," summarizes seven State initiatives bearing on the needs of urban districts, while the fourth section, "Initiatives on Behalf of All New Jersey Schools and Students" describes nine additional State efforts benefiting urban schools. A final section provides a brief conclusion. (AF)

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New State Department of Education

Focus on Urban Education

Saul Cooperman
Commissioner of Education

Prepared under the direction of:

Valarie W. French, Ed.D.
Special Assistant to the Commissioner

New Jersey State Department of Education
225 West State Street
CN 500
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

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NEW JERSEY STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION FOCUS ON URBAN EDUCATION

Under New Jersey's Public School Education Act of 1975, local school district's are required to provide their students with "thorough and efficient" educational opportunity. However, New Jersey's urban districts, which serve nearly 40 percent of the state's school children, face particularly concentrated and complex problems, as they strive to comply with this mandate.

BACKGROUND

In the past, the New Jersey State Department of Education has focused its primary efforts on monitoring local school districts. Recently, however, the department has broadened its activities to include assistance to local districts.

During the course of a major reorganization instituted in 1982, the department defined its core mission as "continued education improvement for all public school students in kindergarten through grade twelve" and the department was redesigned to address that mission. The local district planning process was strengthened. In addition, the process of monitoring local districts by the state was streamlined and improved, thus allowing the Department of Education to identify the most pervasive and difficult challenges faced by local districts. At the same time, new education units of the department and a new system for delivering curriculum services to local districts were established, preparing the department to provide assistance.

The State Department of Education has made it clear that local districts are responsible for providing students a thorough and efficient educational. However, the department is prepared to help districts meet this challenge.

Because of the magnitude of urban educational problems, however, the New Jersey State Department of Education has made a special commitment to help the state's 56 urban districts provide improved educational opportunity for the 400,000 students they serve.

A message to this effect was issued during the first six months of the Cooperman administration, while the reorganization was still unfolding and no new educational units or programs were yet in place. By conducting a major seminar on urban education unlike any previous program in New Jersey, the State Department of Education signaled that it was not only providing assistance to all districts, but that it was making a special commitment to focus on the needs of urban educators and school districts.

The Context of Urban Education

In order to address urban education improvement effectively, it must be recognized at the outset that many problems impact upon urban schools which emanate from outside the school building -- from the family, the neighborhood and the city, from the very social and economic fiber of the community. Low income levels, long-term unemployment, highly mobile populations and chronic violence are characteristics which tend to plague most urban communities. Thus, the school must be seen as a "micro system" within the "macro system" of the community. To be realistic, it must be acknowledged that , while educators can seek to temper these environmental problems, they alone cannot control or change them. Children from these settings frequently come to school with social, emotional and learning problems. This presents a significant challenge to urban educators, who must find ways to teach these children the skills they will need to lead productive adult lives.

The problems of urban districts are further exacerbated by the historical context. Too often, school problems such as classroom disruption, substance abuse, high absenteeism and low test scores have become self-perpetuating. A cycle of poor performance, failure and negative self-image results in apathy and frustration and more problems. And too often, that negative self-image is perpetuated by negative attitudes toward the urban schools from outside those schools' communities.

However, it is clear that urban students can learn and are learning in some schools across the nation. It is also clear ~~that~~ we must expect urban students to learn, along with their suburban and rural peers, and that we must provide the opportunity and support they need. If we do not, we are depriving urban students of their equal opportunity to emerge from our schools as capable participants in today's society.

While urban educators cannot control the home or neighborhood environment, there is one environment they can control, one environment they can shape: the learning environment of the school.

Effective Schools Research

Recent studies generally known as the "effective schools research," have shown that some schools have been more effective than others located in communities with similar socioeconomic status. The effective schools research has shown that the more successful schools have characteristics in common which help build positive attitudes, stimulating environments and higher achievement. While the findings of these studies are not totally consistent, they do reveal that a pattern of characteristics frequently observed in effective schools can be generalized:

- There is strong leadership on the part of the principal;
- The entire school shares a clear set of goals and is committed to achieving those goals in a cooperative and collegial environment;

- The staff expects students to learn;
- There is increased time on academic tasks;
- The school atmosphere is safe and orderly but not oppressive;
- Learning experiences tend to be structured;
- Teachers are not complacent; they accept accountability;
- A collegial atmosphere supports experimentation;
- Mastery of the basic skills is a high priority goals;
- An effective system is in place for monitoring student progress.

By focusing on these characteristics urban educators have broken the cycle of failure and apathy in schools. By helping other educators to enhance these same characteristics, the New Jersey State Department of Education will fully address its core mission charge to provide "continued educational improvement for all public school students."

ACTIVITIES ON BEHALF OF URBAN EDUCATION

As of April 1986, the New Jersey State Department of Education had conducted the following activities on behalf of urban education:

- URBAN SEMINAR

  As mentioned above, the first major curriculum project of the present administration was to bring information on effective urban schools to New Jersey's urban educators during the department's reorganization period. This three-day workshop in May, 1983 signaled the beginning of the department's focus on urban education and continues to be followed up with additional programs and information on effective schools.

- URBAN SPECIALISTS

  Although, by gubernatorial directive, department positions were reduced by 7 percent in affected units during the reorganization, 11 new positions were created for professionals called "Urban Specialists." Located within county offices of education, these professionals work exclusively in urban areas, helping districts to resolve their problems.

- URBAN EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

  The only standing committee appointed by Commissioner Saul Cooperman, this group's membership has strong experience in urban areas. Chief school administrators, parents, community organizations, research agencies, principals and businesses are represented on the committee.

They have contributed valuable insights and suggested ways the department could better serve urban education in the state. The committee continues to serve as an arena for discussion of how department policy and programs can have positive impact on urban districts.

- URBAN LOCATION FOR RCSU

The Regional Curriculum Services Unit-North (RCSU) of the New Jersey Department of Education was deliberately located in an urban community, East Orange, as another commitment to serving urban needs.

- PROGRAMS FOR URBAN DROPOUTS

Because urban districts suffer higher dropout rates, the department funded seven experimental programs in 1984-85 to provide basic education services to young dropouts in urban areas. In 1985-86, two types of programs were funded at $1 million. One type of program, operating in 8 urban districts will serve 1000 dropouts, ages 16 to 18, and provide basic skills instruction in preparation for the GED, personal and career counseling and job-related services. This program will be expanded to serve 2000 youth in the 1986-87 school year. The other type of program, developed jointly by the Departments of Education and Community Affairs in 5 urban districts will provide 400 out-of-school youth, ages 16 to 21 with intensive basic skills instruction and employment opportunities through the New Jersey Youth Corps. The program expects to expand to 4 additional sites in 1986-87.

- SPECIAL ASSISTANT FOR URBAN EDUCATION

A position with direct access to the Commissioner has been created expressly to represent the perspective and investigate the special needs of urban education within the broader spectrum of educational concerns.

- URBAN INITIATIVE

The most comprehensive, long-term effort of the New Jersey Department of Education on behalf of urban education is unique in the nation. It consists of two major components, the Broad-Based Assistance Program and Operation School Renewal. The broad-based program uses a variety of approaches to provide help for 53 of the state's 56 urban districts. Operation School Renewal concentrates on developing and implementing comprehensive school improvement plans in three urban districts: East Orange, Neptune Township, and Trenton.

<u>Broad-Based Assistance Program</u>

The Broad-Based Assistance Program addresses 10 objectives critical to improving education in urban districts:

- improve reading skills
- improve writing skills

- improve math skills
- help more compensatory/bilingual students meet graduation requirements
- reduce incidence of disruptive behavior
- help more dropouts get jobs and diplomas
- increase vocational education to employment rates
- improve special education options for secondary pupils
- increase appropriate instructional use of computers
- treat and prevent substance abuse.

The department is providing direct grants for programs to improve special education options in 3 urban districts grants and grants to help dropouts get diplomas and jobs in 8 districts. These programs will be evaluated and the effective practices widely shared with other districts. In addition, the department makes available services such as conferences, training sessions and booklets in the areas of vocational education and educational technology.

The remaining six objectives are addressed through pilot implementation projects that provide for ongoing training and technical assistance to local district staff by state department staff. The department has organized this assistance to set up pilot sites for each objective. Each pilot project has started with an awareness forum to which all 53 districts are invited. Districts have then submitted plans with specific improvement goals in order to become pilot implementation sites for one or more of the objectives. Most of the pilots in reading, writing, mathematics and bilingual education focus on school and instructional effectiveness for 6-9th grade students who must prepare most diligently for HSPT administration. In the last month, 3 computer instruction pilots at these grade levels have also been funded. The total of pilot projects is:

Substance abuse -- 10
Disruptive youth -- 5
Reading -- 5
Mathematics -- 5
Writing -- 5
Bilingual Education -- 3
Computer Education -- 3

Operation School Renewal

Operation School Renewal is in the second year of funding, but only the first year of implementation.

Operation School Renewal (OSR) is designed to help three districts improve in five areas identified by the Urban Education Advisory Committee as "symptomatic of urban districts' problems":

- Attendance
- Math, reading, and writing achievement scores
- Principals' effectiveness
- Disruptive behavior
- Youth employment through vocational education

To help the districts address these objectives the Department of Education awards grants to purchase consultants, equipment, and staff development training in addition to the planning assistance provided by state department staff. Operation School Renewal is not only designed to aid the three participating districts, but to provide a knowledge base for urban education improvement throughout the state. To that end, rigorous evaluation is an integral part of OSR and mini-conferences on the objectives are held periodically.

- COMPENSATORY EDUCATION

A study conducted by the Department of Education for the 1984-85 school year found that nationally New Jersey ranked first in the percent of students served by compensatory education programs and fourth in average per pupil allocation.

Based on trial administrations of the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT), large numbers of urban students are predicted to fail the test this year. In anticipation of a critical need for remedial programs in urban districts, the New Jersey Department of Education has received over $48 million in state compensatory aid in FY 86 for these programs. This money will be provided in addition to the $110 million in state compensatory education aid.

The Department of Education also offers interested districts the opportunity to participate in the Basic Skills Program Improvement Process (BSPIP). The thorough program review helps schools identify areas for program improvement. To date, staff from 21 urban districts have attended training sessions on a process for critical examination of basic skills programs. Four urban districts have received on-site technical assistance.

- HSPT - SUMMER ASSISTANCE

The Department of Education is targeting $1.5 million in grants to the 17 lowest performing districts--all of them urban--to develop comprehensive remedial plans for secondary students who fail the HSPT. Districts may apply for funds to hire summer school teachers and employ remedial students in part-time summer community-service jobs. The department, through the curriculum delivery service (RCSUs) will help districts use test data in education planning and train teachers in instructional strategies appropriate for teaching HSPT objectives and related skills in summer school and during the 1986-87 school year.

- VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Recognizing the problems the HSPT poses to "high risk" vocational students, the Division of Vocational Education implemented a summer work-study program in 1985 for 125 entering 10th graders in 5 urban sites. The program focused on remediation in reading, writing and math and provided part-time employment for students. Student gains over the 6-8 week period were impressive.

The Division of Vocational Education also surveyed urban district needs to determine ways to improve vocational education programs and increase student employment. As a result, the division provided funds for 23 job placement coordinators, and 4 job developers in urban districts. The division has also made concerted efforts to help districts increase the number of cooperative education placements and school-to-work apprenticeships available to urban vocational education students. In addition, the division has helped 19 urban districts develop career centers.

ACTIVITIES RELEVANT TO URBAN DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT

Besides these activities focused on New Jersey's urban school districts, the State Department of Education is engaged in a number of other initiatives and activities, some of which particularly stress and relate to the needs of urban districts:

- ASSISTANCE TO DISTRICTS NOT CERTIFIED

  ~~Due to the~~ streamlining of the state's monitoring function, local districts which successfully complete the monitoring process will be certified for five years. State resources are freed to focus on those districts which do not achieve certification. As of April 1986, 30 of the 56 urban districts have been certified and 18 are in Level II (i.e., implementing plans to improve failed indicators). Eight districts have yet to be monitored.

- BILINGUAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS

  The New Jersey State Board of Education has adopted a set of standards for bilingual students which is fair, yet ensures the integrity of the state-endorsed high school diploma, thereby facing an issue which has been avoided for years. Resources, materials and training are being provided to districts to help them help their students to achieve these new standards. Beginning in the fall of 1985, staff from 22 districts attended regional Bilingual Education Training Institutes designed to help administrators and teachers improve bilingual and migrant program planning and management, instructional methodology and evaluation. In addition, 5 districts with large numbers of bilingual students began working with state staff in the summer of 1985 to develop and implement three year program improvement plans.

- EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

  The department's 1983 statewide survey of computer use in the schools indicated that students in urban districts had much less access to computers than did their suburban counterparts. To begin narrowing that gap, the department provided 33 fully equipped computer

laboratories for students in the three Operation School Renewal districts. Three regional educational technology centers (ETTCs) have been opened as a resource for teachers statewide. However, at least 50 percent of the teachers trained in the centers must be from urban districts. Eighth grade students and teachers in three urban districts are participating in a pilot project to use computers in basic skills remediation. Six urban districts are currently participating in the Educational Technology Network.

- PROGRAMS FOR DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

In order to reduce student disruption in the classroom, the department is sponsoring a $1 million grant program that will enable districts to create alternative schools for chronically disruptive students. Of the six awards, 3 were made to urban districts, and 2 to consortia that include urban districts.

- EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS GRANTS

This program, funded by state legislation, provides $500 thousand and departmental assistance to selected schools in order to implement the findings of the effective schools research outlined earlier in this report. The grant program encourages systematic efforts to link the findings of research on school effectiveness to research on the process of school improvement. Of the 15 districts which are finalists for the awards, 10 are in urban areas. Awards will be announced in May 1986.

- SPECIAL EDUCATION

Six urban districts (including the 3 OSR districts) were among the 13 districts awarded department grants for three year secondary special education program improvement projects in 1985-86. The program is designed to improve handicapped students' achievement in basic skills and to increase employment of these students.

- RAISED ACADEMIC STANDARDS

The High School Proficiency Test (HSPT) is part of a new statewide testing system that is raising standards for all students. The HSPT tests those ninth grade skills that all students will need to compete in contemporary society. The new testing program's sample skills arrays and early warning system help districts identify problems, and can lead to improved educational programs and appropriate remediation.

Because the HSPT is more rigorous than the MBS, urban districts are likely to have many students who will have trouble passing the test. As a result, the department has undertaken a comprehensive effort to help urban districts prepare their students for the HSPT. This is the most comprehensive effort to provide educational assistance to districts in the recent history of the state.

Curriculum Alignment Workshops

One role of the local district in the effort to raise standards is to examine its curricula and make revisions, as necessary, to ensure that the HSPT skills are being taught. A special series of workshops on Curriculum Alignment was offered to urban districts. A total of 27 urban districts participated in one or more of three sessions.

HSPT Institutes

Districts must also use the results of their annual local and state testing programs to spot curriculum deficiencies. The Regional Curriculum Service Units in conjunction with staff of General and Academic Education has prepared and delivered HSPT Institutes. Teachers from 50 of the 53 targeted urban districts have attended an institute in their region. During the workshops, teachers learn how to use the products that have been developed by the Department of Education to help students learn the skills tested by the HSPT.

INITIATIVES ON BEHALF OF ALL NEW JERSEY SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

The urban districts also benefit from a number of other initiatives undertaken by the reorganized Department of Education. For example,

- REFORM OF TEACHER CERTIFICATION

  Raises standards for teacher certification and broadens the pool of qualified, talented candidates available to local districts through alternative route certification. For the 1985-86 year, 22 urban districts hired teachers through the alternative route program.

- ACADEMY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND MANAGEMENT

  Professional renewal and help for educators who want to sharpen their skills. Of the 61 school teams accepted for the first training cycle 1984-85, 13 were from urban districts. Speedway Avenue School, Newark, received a private foundation grant to support staff participation in academy programs for two years.

  For the 1985-86 year, Academy staff made special efforts to reach urban teachers and administrators. As a result, over the next 18 months all of the administrators from 4 large urban districts will receive training in instructional improvement and supervision of instruction that can then be turn-keyed to teachers in these districts. In two cases Academy staff will travel to the district to provide the training.

- IMPROVED EDUCATIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

  Focuses on the needs of students and fixes responsibility at both the local and state levels for effective planning and results.

- REVISION OF THE STATE MONITORING PROCESS AND STANDARDS

  Targets elements in need of improvement and frees successful districts from time-consuming annual review to concentrate on improving educational programs. Less successful districts receive assistance through the Level II and Level III monitoring processes to develop plans that will raise district programs to approved status. Direct state intervention in school districts, as a "last resort", is being planned.

- CURRICULUM DELIVERY SYSTEM

  Addresses the most pervasive and difficult student-related needs identified by local districts or the Department of Education and provides through the Regional Curriculum Service Units curriculum services, materials, and training in many areas, such as basis skills instruction.

- BASIC SKILLS INCENTIVE PROGRAM

  Beginning in 1987, awards schools up to $300 for each student (above a baseline set in 1986-87) who performs well enough to leave compensatory basic skills classes. The program is designed to reward especially successful compensatory education programs.

- MINORITY TEACHERS PROGRAM

  Will recruit minority high school students to the teaching profession by offering pre-college summer enrichment programs and state-backed loans for tuition at a New Jersey college. The state will forgive the loans of graduates who teach in urban districts for 4 years.

- MATH/SCIENCE IMPROVEMENT GRANTS (E.E.S.A. TITLE II)

  The 56 urban districts received federal allocations totalling $568 thousand to improve instruction in science, mathematics, computer learning and foreign language. In addition, 18 urban districts have received one or more grants to improve curriculum and instruction in math, science and higher order thinking skills and computer networking capabilities totaling $84 thousand.

- PRODUCTS

  In addition, the department develops booklets, guides and handbooks that districts can use to improve their services in many areas. A number of these are particularly relevant for urban districts.

CONCLUSION

The New Jersey State Department of Education has focused on urban education by: undertaking a number of activities which are directed specifically to the needs of urban districts; developing initiatives with special relevance to urban needs; and formulating policies and services which will benefit urban districts along with others.

It must also be noted that the initiatives which presently focus directly on urban needs should ultimately impact positively on non-urban education as well, as the lessons learned are shared with districts throughout the state.

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